

Healthy Food Certification Reimbursement Decrease Testimony

I am Mary Ann Lopez, Food Service Director of the South Windsor Public Schools Child Nutrition Program. I am also President of the School Nutrition Association of Connecticut (SNACT) which is the profession organization supporting the food service staffs in the our schools in the 168 districts in the state. I am speaking in reference to proposed legislation introduced by Senator McKinney and Representative Cafero-Governor's Bill 380 sec. 19. The bill proposes to repeal subsection (a) of 10-215b of the general statues and in essence proposes cutting the Healthy Food Certification funding in half. At present Child Nutrition Programs who choose to participate in the Healthy Food Certification program get 10 cents per lunch meal as this subsection currently reflects.

The Healthy Food Certification has been growing over the last two years and students are learning to make healthier choices in the process. Those of us who have worked with the regulations for the last two years can tell you that there definitely has been progress. However, we can also tell you that there have been some financial challenges that we are still struggling with. Our commitment to providing the best options for our children has forced us to make some difficult decisions about how our programs will run fiscally. Our meal counts have increased in most districts as students replace their past selections of unhealthy snack items with healthier meals. But the a la carte sales that we rely on to support the costs of the meal program are down. Our goals have been to focus on the healthier food selections for the wellness of our students. That would be put into jeopardy if the reimbursement were to be cut in half.

Today's school foodservice operations are truly challenged to succeed as changes in nutrition expectations, the economy and school funding are affecting our programs. In 2004 we worked with legislators and they were amazed to find that our state support to school food services was limited to the matching block grant of 2.3million dollars that was set up in 1983. Our state population has grown, our programs have successfully grown in popularity and therefore we have increased our number of meals served per year. Although in 1983 we were able to receive 7.5 cents per meal, today the net amount per meal now received has shrunk to 4.5 cents. Legislators also learned that child nutrition programs are self sufficient programs.

Our programs continue to assume the costs of implementing these new regulations as well as assuming the increases in food, insurance, equipment, supplies and labor. The current economic downturn has many parents looking for ways to cut back. These parents unfortunately believe they can make a meal from home for less than the cost of a school lunch. So our participation numbers are decreasing.

However, many other parents who have lost jobs are applying in record numbers for free and reduced price meals. Districts around the state have indicated 15% to 40% increases in applications. These kids rarely have money for the a la carte items we offer. Our current federal reimbursements do not cover the cost of a meal! Student meals cost us about \$3.50 or more to prepare and serve while our reimbursement from the federal government for a free meal is \$2.47. The state contribution is \$.045 plus what we receive for the Healthy food Certification. We are losing money for each meal we serve!

School meal programs are in the very precarious spot of maintaining a delicate balance between healthy children and healthy program budgets. Yet we continue to favor healthy children over our programs

bottom lines. We are now looking at putting these goals into jeopardy since our programs are ready to collapse without the support needed to keep them fiscally healthy. This in turn will definitely impact our children and their opportunities to learn healthy eating habits.

I ask you to consider what 5 cents would buy in a healthy meal or snack – it does not buy a piece of fruit or a container of milk or even a portion of bread today. It barely covers the cost of the napkin we offer to each child! As we go to our federal legislators to ask for a substantial increase in the reimbursement we receive for meals from them, our state is deciding to cut back on the amount they are willing to invest in healthy foods for our children!! It is possible that by cutting the funding in half the progress we have made will not only slow but may recede as districts become less able to support the fiscal difficulties we are facing.

I hope that my testimony has enlightened you to the challenges we are facing. I know that you have many decisions that need to be made regarding the budget cuts presented in Governor Rell's proposal. However, feeding our children healthy choices must continue to be a priority. I encourage you to visit our programs and see what we do every day for the children of CT. I am available to answer any additional questions you might have concerning the legislation or our programs.

Respectfully,

Mary Ann Lopez, SNS
Director of Food Services, South Windsor Schools
President, School Nutrition Association of CT